

later removed, stone by stone, from the unhappy site.

But was he trying to support the tower or, rather, helping it on its way? I, of course, can answer the question, since I am the man in the panama hat, the husband at whom Elaine, in the last moments of her life, so triumphantly stares.

Needless to say, I fled to safety, running through the dust and the shrieking tourists as the ground trembled and a cataract of masonry fell from the air. A vast cloud of pulverized marble enveloped the square, and I remember stumbling past the horror-stricken waiters and taxi-drivers who gazed at this field of devastation – not only had the tower vanished, but it had taken their livelihoods with it. Had they known that I was responsible they would have lynched me on the spot, and to this day I have kept silent, still gripped by my guilt over so many deaths, all but one of them entirely innocent.

In a sense the destruction of the tower was inscribed days beforehand in our unhappy tour of Tuscany. Our marriage, problematic from the start, had grown increasingly fraught during the previous year. Elaine had married me on the rebound, to spite an unfaithful lover, but soon decided that her husband, a classics lecturer at a minor university, was minor in all other respects. I was losing my students in a ferment of curriculum changes that would eventually lead to the descheduling of Latin and Greek and their replacement by cultural and media studies. My refusal to sue the university, Elaine decided, was a sign of my innate weakness, a frailty that soon extended to the marriage bed.

Claiming that our union was unconsummated, she consulted a solicitor with a view to divorcing me, but was persuaded to make a last effort to save the relationship. Our marriage became a series of negotiated truces, in which I would yield more and more territory. Still hoping to salvage something, and return to the few weeks of happiness we had known after the wedding, I suggested a holiday in Italy. I had arranged to give three lectures at the University of Florence, which would pay for our air fares, and then we would be free to enjoy ourselves in the Tuscan countryside.

Elaine agreed, but only grudgingly – her first husband had been a modernist architect, and she always claimed to dislike the past, the territory I had made my own, and pretended to prefer California and Texas. But soon after we landed at Pisa airport and took the train to Florence her interest in the Italian renaissance revived in a way that I found almost mysterious. Once I had given my lectures she threw us into a hectic round of tourist activities. Tirelessly she insisted on visiting every church and baptistry, every museum and cathedral. I was puzzled by this passion

for the past until I realized that our visits to these historic sites had exposed yet another of my weaknesses.

As we took the creaking lift to the dome of Florence cathedral Elaine discovered that I was afraid of heights, a fear that I had never noticed in myself but which she immediately set out to maximize. Unsettled by the looming space below the dome, I could barely force myself from the lift. My eyes seemed unwilling to focus on the curving walls, and I felt my heart-beat fall away, leaving me on the edge of a fainting fit.

Gesticulating to Elaine, I refused to follow her around the narrow gallery. Scarcely able to breathe, I waited as she proudly circled the dome, calling to me in a insistent voice that embarrassed me in front of the other tourists. Yet as we left the cathedral she became strangely solicitous, holding my arm in a concerned and reassuring way. Far from deriding me, she seemed genuinely alarmed by my moment of panic.

Despite this show of affection, I soon noticed that our tour of Tuscany had become a series of vertical ascents. No battlement existed that we did not scale, no worn steps that we did not climb. At the Palazzo Vecchio, under the pretext of showing me the spectacular view over the city, she forced me to lean through the very windows from which Lorenzo de Medici had suspended the strangled plotters against his rule. I saw Siena cathedral from the roof down, almost breathing my last in the confined bell-tower. And all the while Elaine would watch me with her affectionate and lingering smile, like an older sister observing a timid sibling. Was she trying to cure me of my fear of heights, or to rub in my sense of my own inadequacy?

A climax of sorts came at San Gimignano, that surrealist township of towers constructed during the 14th century by rival families within this independent city state. As Elaine moved tirelessly from one tower to the next, I retreated to a café beside the cathedral with its macabre images of hell. All afternoon she gazed at the towers, admiring these symbols of an erect masculinity of which her husband was incapable, then sat beaming at me as the tourist coach carried us to Florence.

Three days later, when we arrived in Pisa for our London flight, I had been routed by Elaine's campaign. We were both eager to return to England, I to the safety of my university office, she to her solicitor. We had packed in silence, and reached Pisa airport with two hours to spare before our flight. Inevitably we found ourselves taking a taxi into the city. Reading from her guide-book, Elaine described the baptistry and cathedral in glowing terms, but I knew that our



BOOKS



REVIEWED

Alpha and Omega

Stephen Baxter

Alpha and Omega: an intriguing first novel, and, alas, a final one.

In "No Longer Touch the Earth" (*Interzone* 72) I paid a flying visit to an alternate universe structured around Aristotelian cosmology. In Aristotle's rigid and stultifying universe, an immobile Earth is surrounded by nine principal spheres, concentric and transparent, enclosing each other onion-fashion. The innermost sphere is that of the Moon; the outermost, beyond the fixed stars, is the sphere of the Prime Mover who keeps the whole machinery turning. The universe actually contains no less than 54 spheres, some to account for the complex motion of the planets, and some are cog-like "neutralising" spheres which turn in the opposite direction to the planets: for, remarkably, to Aristotle this mechanism was no mere geometric model, but the actual physical reality of the world.

In my story I posited an Earth essentially like ours at the centre of such a universe. Then – I figured – apart from the abstruse speculations of astronomers, the bizarre nature of the universe would make no difference to history (until Scott and Amundsen walk to the South Pole, and discover a huge crystalline axis... but that is, literally, another story).

In *Celestial Matters* (Tor, \$23.95), Richard Garfinkle – a writer from Illinois, new to me – makes a much more thoughtful and intensive exploration of the Aristotelian world. And he goes further than I did, in accepting the rest of Aristotelian physics. In the sub-lunar region, matter consisted of combinations of the four elements – earth, water, air and fire. The planets consist of a fifth element; its natural motion is circular... Garfinkle's story is essentially a hard sf adventure, the plot deriving pretty rigorously from the physical rules of this setting.

The date is approximately 400 AD, by our calendar; but history has diverged. The Greek Empire has persisted for a thousand years, and has spent much of that time fighting an inconclusive war with the Middle Kingdom of Asia. Now, a spaceship sculpted from Moon matter has been built to voyage through the spheres, and return with the ultimate weapon – a piece of the Sun itself. Aias, the scientist-hero, is assailed by Middle Kingdom saboteurs, and must fight his way against extraordinary odds to reach, at last, a resolution that chimes satisfactorily with the physical and philosophical basis of the novel.

The strength of the book is the physics, which is beautifully worked out and confidently depicted. For example, the characters seek water from the wood of packing crates: "There is a great deal of water in wood. All we have to do is remove the

earth from it. We can use air-silver and fire-gold for that. Clovix! ..." And I loved the glimpses of the spontaneous-generation labs.

The social and ideological aspects of the universe are less well developed, however. Although there are passing references to the classical gods, there is little sense of how it must be to inhabit a universe which is, so obviously, the artefact of a superior Being. The characters – confident scientists and engineers – are sometimes suspiciously modern in their outlook and language: their world-view consists of making gadgets and running projects and *doing things*; the feel is often more of modern Americans than Aristotelian Greeks. The overall effect of this lack of depth is to reduce the novel, at times, to a ride around a spectacular Aristotelian theme park, rather than a sample of a genuinely different world view.

We have the additional complication of a history which diverges significantly from ours, from around 300 BC. In a manner reminiscent of Paul McAuley's Leonardo in *Pasquale's Angel*, Aristotle forsakes philosophy for a semblance of modern, experimental science. The resulting weapons technology enables Alexander the Great to wage still greater

Wars – thus initiating the conflict with the Middle Kingdom – and to avoid his early death. But it was not clear to me how Aristotle's conversion derived, if at all, from the differing nature of the universe. After all, *our* Aristotle believed the world was all spheres anyhow, and *he* did not become an antique Edward Teller; so why should Garfinkle's? And it seemed to me that the Greeks would have needed a major cultural transformation to adopt the precepts underlying a modern scientific method, and the source of such a change isn't clear.

A basic "rule" of satisfactory alternative history is that all changes depicted should flow from a single alteration. Of course all such rules are there to be broken, but I fear in *Celestial Matters* we see the consequences; the multiply-changed nature of history becomes rather arbitrary and confusing. (And, incidentally, I was left wondering what happened to Christ, in this universe...)

This is a first novel, and the strains sometimes show. The opening is rather muddled, indirect and dialogue-free; once the setting narrows down to the Moon-matter ship, and its remarkable voyage, Garfinkle is more assured. A more serious disappointment is the non-visual nature of much of the prose. What attracted me to Aristotle's universe was its stunning visual beauty. Sadly we get little sense of this, in the course of Garfinkle's much more extensive voyage: how does it *feel*, to sail through the thin air around the Sun, and peer down through the shimmering shells to Earth, thousands of miles below? Sadly, we have to guess.

These criticisms aside, however, I can recommend the book. It is an interesting and original adventure set in a genuinely "other" universe; I look forward to Garfinkle's future excursions.

So, from first to last.

Mike McQuay, who died in 1995, was a US writer whose core themes were set out in his first novel, *Life-Keeper* (1980): a tough, Chandleresque, streetwise hero – male – strives to overcome the corrupt forces of the world in which he finds himself (in this case an Orwellian fake-war scenario, designed to keep the citizens under control). McQuay returned to similar scenarios in subsequent books, but perhaps achieved his greatest success with *Memories* (1987), an ambitious time-travel novel, which won the Philip K. Dick Award. McQuay also produced thrillers and young-adult fiction. An author of 35 novels, he was a writer of considerable command and energy, and he will be missed.

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